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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the usefulness of the labels "native speaker" (NS) and "non-native speaker" (NNS) in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The researcher's anecdotal experience is that NNSs bring under-appreciated strengths to teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The recent research in this field is reviewed and the issues are raised when speakers of a language are divided into the NS and NNS categories. Excerpts from discussions and interviews with TESOL students, graduates, and professors are included to show the range of opinion on this subject. It is concluded that attitudes in the TESOL field are shifting, and NNSs are seen in a more positive light as their contributions to the teaching of ESOL are increasingly recognized and appreciated. This is especially true when NNS teachers teach students who share their first language and culture. It is suggested that greater openness and wider discussion of the contributions of NNS to the field and to their students is needed and should in time result in greater use of and opportunities for NNS teachers. (KFT)

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Native and Non-Native Speakers: The View from Teacher Education

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Midwest Modern Languages Association
November 1999

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Culture and language make deep impressions on humans; however, exactly how language and culture influence thought and behavior and whether this changes throughout one's life span is very much open to debate. Benjamin Whorf believed that people live in different "habitual thought worlds" (Whorf 1941) and that these worlds are determined by our language and culture.

> We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. This agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organizing and classification of data which the agreement decrees (Whorf 1940, 229).

Researchers before and since Whorf have debated the issue of linguistic relativity and while no clear consensus has been reached, a tendency has developed to accept the weaker version of the cultural relativity hypothesis. This weak version holds that culture and language "influence" rather than "determine" how humans from different groups think and behave.

Living in a world in which international and interlingual encounters are commonplace, it is hard to deny that language and culture shape us in definite and different ways. How this knowledge serves us can range widely, including causing people to make stereotypes about members of groups other than their own to handling cross-cultural situations differently than they would have without the knowledge of cultural and linguistic differences. In the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), the teaching of culture has been increasingly emphasized in recent years, but the subject of the congruence of the ESOL teacher's cultural background and experiences with that of his/her students has been less evident. The purported superiority of the native speaker as a language teacher has overshadowed, at least until recently, the advantages that a non-native speaker might have when teaching students from the same or other non-native background.

The uses of the labels native speaker and non-native speaker have recently been called into question in the field of TESOL. Books and articles have been written on the subject (Braine 1999, Cook 1999, Lung 1999) and a caucus for non-native educators in the TESOL professional organization has been created as a forum for interested parties to share concerns and solutions regarding non-native speakers teaching ESOL. There has been widespread discussion within the TESOL organization over who is best qualified to teach

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ESOL, and the long standing and often unspoken assumption that non-native speakers are "failed native speakers" is being challenged (Cook 1999, 185). This discussion is not entirely new and shares ground with the literature on world Englishes (Kachru 1992) and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992).

My own experience as a professional in a TESOL teacher training program in a midwestern university has led me to the view that the resources that non-native speakers bring to the task of teaching ESOL have been underestimated and underutilized and that many of the non-native speakers who are learning to be teachers will actually be more successful at teaching English than would native speakers in the same teaching situations. Among the reasons for this are that the non-native speakers have had the experience of learning English themselves and also because they understand and may inhabit "thought worlds" that are similar to those of their students. The label "non-native" implies a deficit when in fact this is not the case at all.

This paper reviews the recent research and discusses the issues raised when speakers of a language are divided into the categories of native and non-native speakers. Excerpts from discussions and interviews with TESOL students, graduates and professors are included to show the range of opinion on this subject. Suggestions will also be made about where to go from here.

Recent Literature on the Native and Non-Native Speaker Issue

Auerbach (1993) asks the question "Who's the expert here anyway?" in an article that questions the reliance on native speakers and the exclusive use of English in TESOL (25). She describes situations with immigrants and refugees where teachers and tutors who share the background and at least some of the experiences of the learners are better able to reach and help those learners:

> Whereas non-native speakers of English with nontraditional educational backgrounds can be trained in literacy/ESL pedagogy, it is not clear that the reverse is true—that the understandings that come through shared life experience and cultural background can be imparted through training. These are qualities which may be truly intrinsic to non-native speakers (although these characteristics too are certainly not sufficient in themselves to assure good teaching (28).

Cook (1999) claims that the emphasis on the native speaker in language teaching can mean that language learners are faced with a virtually unattainable goal—to speak and understand a second language in exactly the same ways that a native speaker does. Cook cites Bley-Vroman (1983) who refers to the "comparative fallacy" in which non-native speakers are referred to as succeeding or failing in their language learning when they measure up to or fail to meet native speaker standards. Cook recommends that "language teaching should place more emphasis on the student as a potential and actual L2 [second

language] user and be less concerned with the monolingual native speaker" (196). He also stresses a related idea, that language learners ought to be seen as "multicompetent" rather than incompetent or incomplete in their language abilities.

The subject of importing native speakers to teach English is addressed by Lung in a recent article (Lung 1999). The author worked alongside native speakers in the Hong Kong school system, and reports on the advantages and disadvantages of the presence and privileging of native speakers in a system that is heavily dependent on local teachers. These teachers are all products of the local system and so are well-versed in the backgrounds and future needs of the students. Lung's most serious complaint about the policy of recruiting native speaker teachers is the adverse effect this can have on the morale and status of the non-native speaking teachers and that this practice marginalizes these local teachers. The author suggests that instead of bringing in native speaking teachers from New Zealand, Australia, the U.K. and the U.S., that local teachers receive better training and be acknowledged for their "clear understanding of the needs and backgrounds of the students, including cultural and linguistic factors" (Lung, 8).

Interview and Questionnaire

I was interested in finding out how my colleagues and students in TESOL felt about the subject of native speakers and non-native speakers in TESOL, and so I engaged several professors and students (some graduates) in face to face and electronic conversations on the subject.

I interviewed one former student in person and then sent a questionnaire over the via e-mail on the subject of native and non-native speakers in TESOL to a number of faculty members, students and former students. The following questions were asked:

1. What **advantages** do you think the following have when teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)?

a) non-native speakers of English

b) native speakers of English

2. Do you think that is useful to distinguish between native and non-native speakers in the field of TESOL? Explain why or why not.

3. What attitudes have you encountered about non-native speakers as ESOL teachers? Please specify if you thought those attitudes were positive, negative, neutral or mixed.

4. Please write any comments about this topic that you have that were not covered by the above questions.

Responses From TESOL Faculty

Two American faculty members and one visiting faculty member from Russia replied to the questionnaire. The advantages of non-native speakers teaching ESOL, according to them, were that non-native speakers bring a variety of background experiences, attitudes and openness to their teaching situations. They also stressed that the non-native speaker has the advantage of having gone through the process of learning English and this could help them in their planning and teaching decisions. The faculty members also mentioned that the comparative focus that non-native speakers bring to the teaching of a second language would be a clear advantage in terms of both structural and cultural aspects of that language. The Russian faculty member also pointed out that the non-native speaker, assuming that this person speaks the same language as his/her students, can use the native language as a resource, especially in classes where students are at the beginning stages of learning English.

Native speakers, on the other hand, typically have certain attributes that non-native speakers do not, according to these faculty members. Specifically, one of them says that native speakers have an "intuitive, innate knowledge of English grammar and social rules of language usage" and that they bring authentic speech and culture into the classroom (including educational culture). Another respondent held that this "feel for language" that native speakers are known for is not "always positive;" that the assumption that they are experts on all aspects of the English language by virtue of their status as native speaker is not always borne out in fact.

All three faculty members believed that it is useful to distinguish between native speakers and non-native speakers in teaching ESOL, but for different reasons. The Russian respondent wrote that the different backgrounds of non-native and native speakers impact "their process of teaching" – non-native speaking teachers face the challenge of learning and then passing onto their students how to communicate in English in ways that are "not only grammatically and lexically correct but [also are] *appropriate*..." She also said that the native speaker often must teach students who come to the classroom with very different ideas from the teacher about education and foreign language learning and also about the roles of teacher and student. This Russian respondent, similar to Cook (1999), points out that the English-speaking native speaker is often monolingual and that this is a major difference between the native speaker and non-native speaker teacher in terms of identifying with and communicating with students.

The other faculty member respondents pointed out that it is useful to distinguish between native and non-native speaking teachers because of the teachers' different backgrounds and perspectives. According to one of them, "if education is to build on that which students have already experienced and that which they know, then it is imperative to distinguish in teacher education."

In terms of attitudes about non-native speakers as ESOL teachers, the two American faculty members generally bemoaned the fact that native speakers are repeatedly thought of as superior to non-native speakers, although there is a definite movement afoot in the TESOL profession to revise this view in support of the non-native speaking teacher. One of the respondents said:

> I am particularly saddened that our non-native speaking students in TESOL believe that they will never be as good as native speaking teachers, simply because they are not native speakers. It has been possible to modify these attitudes somewhat... but I think all of us as TESOL teacher trainers need to counter this mistaken belief and educate all our students, native speaker and non-native speaker, to understand that being a native speaker is not the most important or even an important characteristic of a successful ESL teacher.

The Russian respondent had encountered generally positive attitudes especially regarding the high level of proficiency teachers from her country had managed to attain with little exposure to "native speakers or an authentic environment."

Responses From TESOL Students

In a discussion with a recent graduate of our TESOL program, I asked her what advantages non-native speakers might have in teaching ESOL. Instead of talking about the advantages non-native speakers have when teaching, she reflected on how valuable the non-native speakers are in the TESOL program when students are studying the structure of English. She specifically mentioned that non-native speakers have experience with explicitly learning subtle distinctions in English syntax, lexicon and phonology that native speakers may either not be aware of or take for granted. Non-native speakers would certainly carry this awareness over into their teaching, she said, but she suggested that it be taken advantage of during the training period as well. The native speakers would benefit from seeing English from a different perspective and the non-native speakers would benefit from having their experience and insights valued.

The students who responded to the questionnaire (three were Americans and one was Japanese) also mentioned explicit knowledge of English language structure and ability to communicate in the students' first language as advantages that non-native speakers have when teaching ESOL. They stressed some of the same things that the faculty members did when describing advantages that native speakers have when teaching ESOL, putting an emphasis on native speaker command of colloquialisms, pragmatics, slang, and pronunciation.

In answer to the question about whether it is useful to distinguish between native speakers and non-native speakers in TESOL, one student said that making this distinction "seems prejudicial, much like special education labels

are in the field of education." Two of the American students said that it depends on the situation. One of them made the point that this:

> ...depends greatly on the environment in which English is being taught (grade school in non-native homeland vs. immigration relocation programs, for example). I do not adhere to the belief that a native speaker is always the best choice due to the varying reasons people choose to learn English and the environments in which they are learning it.

Another student agreed with this position, citing different reasons for having both native speakers and non-native speakers on a teaching staff. This point had also been mentioned by two of the faculty members who stressed that reasons other than linguistic ability—for example, politics or economics—might influence a decision to hire a native speaker or non-native speaker in a particular situation.

As for attitudes they have encountered about non-native speakers in TESOL, the American students mentioned negative attitudes that they had noticed, particularly when the setting is an English-speaking country. One student said that learners:

> ...may express dissatisfaction when a non-native teaches a class because they feel they came here and paid their money for 'the real thing,' the native speaking teacher. However, I think most students get over this especially if they've been here a while and realize that there are many different Englishes spoken here and it's good, especially for listening skills...

The Japanese student who had recently completed her practice teaching in an American classroom said that she had encountered only positive attitudes among her students and from her cooperating teacher. This had also been the case for the Russian faculty member who speculated that the people she had encountered might only be exercising politeness, but it is encouraging that these two non-native speakers have felt accepted in their role as non-native English speaking ESOL teacher.

Concluding Remarks

There seems to be a shifting in attitudes in TESOL in the direction of seeing non-native speakers in a more positive light and acknowledging their unique contributions to teaching ESOL, especially when these non-native speakers teach students who share their first language and culture. Like all change, however, it is coming slowly and will no doubt not happen uniformly in all settings. An increase in research and consciousness raising at professional meetings as well as discussions such as the ones engaged in for this paper should all contribute to increased awareness and perhaps also changes in

behavior; for example in the hiring of ESOL teachers with different kinds of credentials. Students and faculty in TESOL recognize that distinctions are often made between native and non-native speakers in the profession and that making these distinctions is not necessarily negative. It may be that attitudes about non-native speakers in TESOL are not always conveyed in public which could be why the non-native speakers who answered this questionnaire had not heard negative opinions expressed about non-native speakers teaching ESOL. Finally, the advantages that non-native speakers have in teaching English need to be discussed openly and reiterated if acceptance and valuing of diversity in the teaching of ESOL is to become a reality.

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